10: d'Orleans--307-308 T-3 (1891-92) 1894 Laos
116, 342, 476

"There would be but a poor opening for labour here, [LSS: at Luang Prabang] as what work has to be done is paid for in kind, one family helping another. Thus, for instance, let us suppose that a certain family wants to build a house. Having gradually got together all the necessary materials, it calls its neighbours together, and the [308] whole work is completed in a single day, the housewarming taking place the same evening, and all who have shared in the work joining in it."

526

Sports and games. These are widespread in Laos.

"Boxing has fervent disciples there, as does flat-handed wrestling. Some of the champions have remarkable professional skill, agility and cleverness which never lose their elegance.

"The Laotians play with balls and shuttlecocks, but without using either their hands or rackets. Any other part of the body, for example, from the foot to the head, may be used to return a ball or shuttlecock. Nearly all young people play this extremely graceful game, which requires great suppleness, a quick eye and perfect ease of movement, which in this game should be neither jerky nor violent (1).

171

(1) This game is also played in Burma, whence it was doubtless imported into Laos. The ball is made of large-mesh rattan latticework and is spherical in form with a diameter of ten to twelve centimeters. The shuttlecock is half-spherical. It is of similar construction, covered with cloth and provided with feathers along the edge. (Author's note.)

525

"Like all Orientals, Laotians have a passion for games of chance in any form. This is the race's only real vice, and the French administration is obliged to maintain active surveillance over it.

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"A form of chess, more complicated than the game played in Europe, is widely played, and a few players are highly reputed for their perfect grasp of the game." (Le Laos français.)

527

Celebrations and festivals. In addition to the legal public holidays, the temperament of the Laotians leads them to celebrate a great many others, for the most diverse and the most futile reasons. In principle, the Laotian makes no expenditures to ameliorate his daily fare and the pleasures of the table, as far as choice foods go, are indifferent to him. This does not prevent him, however, from organizing celebrations among relatives, friends and neighbors which anyone can attend without being specially invited. This custom of giving public festivities, or "Ngans" to use the native term, where everyone eats and drinks, has a good time, jokes and makes love, shows the friendly side of the Laotian character and the extreme sociability of the people. Those whose personal resources are too limited to cover the expenses of a "Ngan" either join with others in similar straits or go skirmishing through the city or village in search of the money, food, brandy and wax needed to accomplish their plan.

476

476 463 527

Since there is not, so to speak, any class of salaried workers in Laos except in certain types of work and in transport by pirogues and rafts, the inhabitants of any given center lend one another their help in farming, harvesting, building houses or pirogues, etc. Taking turns, the one who has asked help of his neighbors will put on a celebration for them when the work is over, and will himself receive an invitation from someone else in return for help which he has given.

[192]

Laotian celebrations, in which the bonzes are never forgotten, are usually given under the verandas of the pagodas or in their dependencies, unless they take place in the host's own home or under sheds specially constructed for the purpose on one side. The latter is always the case in a "Ngan" given for those who have helped in building a house, and the same is true for a birth or marriage.

527

Celebrations generally begin towards four or five in the afternoon when the heat is beginning to wane. They last all night and sometimes resume on the following day after the guests have relaxed for a few hours. Some "Ngans" go on in this way for nearly a week and are interrupted only by the coming of the Laotian sabbath, a day of absolute rest when only the preparation of food is permitted, and no work or pleasure. By the light of kerosene lamps borrowed here and there, or of resinous torches, the girls, who are decked out in all their finery, are stationed in a line squatting down against a wall or partition. Before them there are [221] vases made of copper, silver or porcelain. They all pretend to be busy with minor tasks and may imitate, for example, the preparation of food. But in reality this is only their way of keeping some kind of countenance.

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The adults and children of both sexes are massed at each end of the row of girls. Then the young men, their heads covered with scarves, come and squat down opposite the girls and with their heads still covered begin an animated conversation which soon turns into regular flirting. If there is enough space the orchestra takes up its position nearby and in the center, between the young people, are the singers, improvisers and "Kene" players. Cakes, fruit, quids of betel, cigarettes, rice brandy and various condiments are passed around.

Spectators who have not been specially invited come and stand behind the young people, as do passersby who drop in for a quid, a cigarette, a cup of brandy or a bowl of rice, or to listen to the songs and music for a little while.

342 bedrooms separated from each other by partitions or curtains, the
[178] other is the communal room. In the space between the inner and outer beam, and not limited by the longitudinal partition, is the altar on which there are always one or several buddhas. It is placed on the side of the bedrooms, on the "soung" side of the dwelling, that is on the side opposite the entrance. The dimensions of the dwellings vary between six and twenty-four meters long by four to nine meters wide.

342 The houses are most often open to the east or to the north. They
823 may also overlook what is passing by in the streets or the paths and, as the case may be, the whole length of the river. For there is a superstition which forbids building "across the current," which is considered as unconquerable and invincible, and it would be dangerous to defy it.

343 The outhouses consist of an adjoining kitchen and a granary, a
[252] few meters removed from the principal dwelling. Near this granary is found the picturesque rice pestle (khok khao) which the women work with their feet.

343 [62] All the villagers participate in building the house. When the
● 476 propitious day and moment have been determined, the owner feeds everybody the whole time the house is being built.

Tattooing

301 Every self-respecting Laotian must be tattooed. The absence of
885 tattooing is a sign of mental and moral, therefore of social, inferiority.
562 As a general rule, however, the Laotian woman is not tattooed. This custom is found only among the women of Youan, Kha or Lu.

301 The Laotian is tattooed chiefly on his thighs, forearms and chest. The tattooing on the thighs is so close together that from a distance a tattooed man looks as if he were wearing close-fitting blue shorts. The Laotians are called "white bellies" as opposed to those who are tattooed down to the navel and are then called black bellies. The colors used for tattooing are indigo blue, red, and black made from a mixture of lampblack diluted with buffalo gall.

[751] Those who have been tattooed are convinced that the signs they wear give them certain supernatural powers, particularly making them invulnerable to bullets and snake bites. During the events of 1941 Siamese soldiers were found wearing white cotton vests covered with cabalistic signs closely related to tattooing. These are a kind of removable tattooing intended to protect those who are wearing them.